

# VENIAL SIN



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By

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Bishop of Sebastopolis**

**COVER ART:** “Confession” - oil on canvas by Guiseppe Crespi (1665 – 1747)

The painting may be seen at Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Gallery) in Dresden, Germany. Crespi is best known today as one of the main proponents of baroque genre painting in Italy \*



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# Venial Sin

“The Church holds that it were better for the Sun and Moon to drop from Heaven, for the Earth itself to fall, and for all the many millions who are on it to die of starvation, in extremest agony (as far as temporal affliction goes), than that one soul, I will not say should be lost, but should COMMIT ONE VENIAL SIN.”

- Cardinal Newman in *Anglican Difficulties*, p. 199. -

## PREFACE

By

**His Eminence A. Cardinal Gasquet, O.S.B.**

BISHOP VAUGHAN'S book on venial sin needs but few words of preface. The author is too well known to all to require any introduction, and the subject is so vitally important to the lives of all Catholics that it claims the attention and careful consideration of all. Unfortunately, there are some — alas! I fear I should say many — who have no true perception of the evil of venial sin. They would regard mortal sins with horror, and proclaim their determination to avoid them at all cost, having no wish to offend God gravely, but at the same time they pay little attention to those lighter offenses against God and His law, by which they undoubtedly offend Him, although in a lesser degree. Such people probably would be horrified at the idea that they would refuse to serve Him even in small things; but the truth is that they do not sufficiently appreciate the fact that in committing deliberate venial sin they are really refusing their reasonable service to God.

It is to be feared that there are not a few amongst us who flippantly declare that, whilst of course they desire to keep themselves free from any grievous offense against God, they have no particular desire to be saints, by which they mean that they regard the avoidance of every small sin as almost impossible to the ordinary man, and as only to be looked for in those whom God has called to walk in the higher paths of perfection. This notion shows how little such people remember that God has called every soul He has created to be holy — that is, to be pure and free from the stain of even small blemishes in His sight, and that every offense against His law is an evil thing that must be avoided at all cost.

It must never be forgotten that God is always exercising an attraction on the soul He has made for Himself. As the magnet draws the iron to itself, so does He draw the Christian soul to Himself. Mortal sin, of course, breaks this relation with God; but venial sin weakens it, just as rust on the iron tends to partially stop the force of its attraction. It is, therefore, no light thing, from a spiritual point of view, to interpose any obstacle to God's action on the soul. Moreover, it is certain that in itself such light offenses against the Almighty tend to grow, unless checked in time. Just as many maladies of the body, which in the beginning are but slight, often become grave, if not looked to in time, and, indeed, not infrequently result in death, so the evil of venial sin, if not vigorously dealt with in the beginning, tends to grow, and indeed frequently leads to those grievous sins which kill the soul.

In fact, no deliberate venial sin can be neglected if we, even in a small degree, desire to serve God. We frequently forget how God is offended by even slight disobediences. Saint Teresa was once shown the place in hell where she would have been had she not changed her life, and as far as appears there was nothing in her conduct that amounted to any mortal offense against God. So, too, Saint Catherine of Siena, when she was shown how hideous venial sin made the soul in God's sight, fainted at the vision. Holy Scripture shows us also the punishment that follows on deliberate venial sin. For instance, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land for doubting the providence of God, and David suffered great troubles for some light offense against His law.

Saint Francis de Sales writes very practically about the necessity of constant watchfulness in order to avoid these venial offenses. He warns us that it is tempting God to have any truce with this or that evil habit and further tells us it is necessary to wage war against our venial sins. "Aurelius," he says, "painted the faces of all pictures like the women he loved. One who is given to fasting looks on himself as very devout, provided he fasts, though his heart is full of anger, and not daring to moisten his tongue with wine or even with water for the love of sobriety, does not hesitate to pollute it with the blood of his neighbor by detraction and calumny. Another esteems himself devout because he says a great number of prayers every day, though after he has finished he gives rein to his tongue in words that wound and are proud and injurious before his neighbors and servants.

True and living devotion, Philothea, presupposes the love of God, and presupposes no truce with any failing. "This is why one who does not observe all the commandments of God cannot be looked on as either good or devout." These words of Saint Francis, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, suffice to show us the importance of avoiding even light

offenses against God if we desire, as with God's help we all do, to serve Him and allow Him to draw us to Himself. This is why it is so important to try to avoid even venial sins, about which this little book speaks so plainly.

## INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

I once published a book entitled “Thoughts for All Times,” now in its 18th edition. The present little work might yet more appropriately be entitled Thoughts for All Persons, for it is not addressed to any special class, but appeals directly to every human being that has reached the use of reason. We are all, without exception, sinners. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the old and the young, the healthy as well as the sick—all fall occasionally into venial faults and should try to understand and appreciate their extreme offensiveness in the sight of God.

Indeed, so great is the evil of sin, that if, through the blessing of God, this little treatise should be the means of preventing but ONE venial sin in any ONE of its readers, it will have accomplished a most glorious task, for it will have prevented an evil far greater (could one but realize it) than the Black Death, the bubonic plague, the earthquake in Tokyo, or even the universal Deluge itself. We devoutly hope it may prevent not one only but many, and not in one only, but in many readers, which may God grant.

— December 1923 —

## CHAPTER I

“A venial sin may indeed appear slight, but it is an offense AGAINST GOD, and this is enough to cause it to be regarded, by one who has a right conception of that Infinite Being, with greater horror than that with which he would witness the utter destruction and instant return to its original nothingness of this vast machine of the universe, with all the creatures it contains, such as the heavens, the stars, the elements, and men and angels.” — The Christian Reformed, by B. Rogacci, S.J., p. 94.

MORTAL sin is a subject very frequently treated in Catholic pulpits, and often with considerable power and earnestness. But venial sin is scarcely ever touched upon, except incidentally and in passing. Yet it will be admitted on a little reflection that, in many respects, venial sin is a more practical and a more pressing topic, and for the following reasons:

First. Because everyone, even the good and the pious, falls into venial sins — at all events, indeliberate venial sins — whereas a very considerable number keep themselves habitually free from grosser crimes.

Second. Because the opportunities of committing grievous sins are comparatively few and far between, whereas the occasions of committing venial sins are constantly arising, so that most people are guilty of them many times a day.

Third. Because there can be no doubt but that if men can only be persuaded to be really faithful and earnest in their efforts to avoid venial sin, they will run very little risk of yielding to what is so immeasurably worse. In the business of this life, it is commonly said: “Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves.” In the business of the next life we may apply the same motto with even greater truth, and say with perfect confidence: “Keep away all venial sin, so far as you can, and the mortal sins will keep away of themselves.”

Fourth. To these three reasons a fourth may be added, which deserves considerably more attention than it generally receives. It is that by speaking often of venial sin we may help as many as possible to escape, or, at all events, to diminish the amount of that truly appalling punishment in the next world which inevitably follows upon every violation of God's law, however slight, for which full satisfaction has not been made in this. Charity itself ought to be enough to induce us to warn others of the terrible consequences, which few at all realize, and to urge them to take measures to atone for their many daily offenses while there is yet time.

On entering upon this very practical subject, we may well begin by asking how it comes about that we Catholics, who know so well what the Church teaches on the point, do not struggle to avoid venial sin far more carefully and far more resolutely than we do. It is a most distressing and a most extraordinary, but an undeniable fact, that even pious men, and such as enjoy a well-deserved reputation for holiness, are constantly being betrayed into the commission of light faults.

They misjudge their neighbors; they entertain uncharitable thoughts; or they are testy, jealous, and exacting. They say their prayers in a distracted, inattentive, perfunctory manner. Perhaps they are easily ruffled, and have a few angry words with their wives, children, or servants. They allow little things to put them out. They murmur and scold because the dinner is not properly cooked, or because the soup is cold. Or they give way to irritation because they are kept waiting at the door, or because their call has not been returned, or their pressing business letter has received no answer, or because they imagine that they have been, in some way, slighted or treated with scant courtesy and



respect. Then on occasion, they will tell what are called, “white lies,” and repeat ill-natured tales, just to amuse their neighbors. In short, in these and in a thousand other small ways they fall short of absolute perfection. As a result, day after day the impalpable dust of sin falls and gathers about their souls. I am, of course, supposing these offenses to be more or less deliberate and willful and not faults of mere frailty, surprise, or inadvertence. Then, I ask why even the elect, the chosen ones of God, fall so often?

It cannot possibly be due to any extreme difficulty in avoiding these little breaches of God's Law, for the simple reason that such extreme difficulty really does not exist. In fact, these very persons have often, on occasion, overcome and mastered difficulties far greater than any which these present. No. The main reason why we do not wage a more determined and a more successful warfare against such defects is that we do not really understand nor apprehend what an appalling evil venial sin is. We do not see the harm of it. We cannot fully persuade ourselves that it can possibly matter so very, very much whether we utter a little spiteful remark or no, or whether we yield to or resist a distraction in prayer. We know, of course, that it is better to do the right thing. But we are not at all prepared to affirm roundly and boldly that it is a most serious matter, and one calculated to affect our eternal happiness, and our relations to God Himself, and to bring down upon us all kinds of disasters. No, we do not at all grasp the unspeakable evil of venial sin. In fact, we concern ourselves but very little about it. We make no serious and sustained efforts to avoid it because — whatever our theory may be — in actual practice we attach very little importance to it.

A twofold task awaits us. The first is to explain why we estimate venial sins so lightly; and the second is to point out how utterly false and fatal such an estimate is.

The chief reason why we think so lightly of venial sins is because, alas! We are so very familiar with mortal sins. Let me explain. It is a well-recognized fact that the presence of a much greater evil will always render us, in a great measure, insensible to the presence of a lesser evil. A hunter who is being devoured by a tiger does not heed — in fact, he scarcely adverts at all to — the sharp thorn, which, in the struggle, he has trodden on, and which is now actually entering his foot. He makes nothing of it. Yet, if he had nothing more serious to distract him and engage his attention, he would make a good deal of it, and declare that he was in agony, and would seek to withdraw the thorn without delay. In a somewhat similar way, one who is actually being devoured by mortal sin (or who sees others falling victims to it) is apt to think very lightly of the sharp briars and thorns of venial sin which are tearing and lacerating the soul.

Or to employ another illustration. Just as a greater light eclipses a lesser, so a greater evil eclipses a lesser evil. Let us take an example from the physical world. Go out into the

night. Look up into the sky. See how clearly and how brightly the stars are shining. Note how boldly and how prominently they stand out against the dark background. Anyone who can see at all can see these brilliantly gleaming points. But now take up your stand on exactly the same spot in the daytime. Look up into the cloudless blue on a summer morning when the sun is flooding the heavens with its golden rays. Are the stars still there? Of course they are! They are scattered in hundreds and thousands over the whole expanse; True; but do they stand out clearly, as during the darkest night? Can you see them distinctly; or rather, let me ask, can you see them at all? No! Not a trace of them remains. Why? Because the immeasurably greater brilliance of the sun wholly hides and eclipses them. They are there, as they always are, and they have lost none of their beauty, yet they no longer produce the slightest impression on our eyes. The more intense light of the sun has rendered them invisible. Could you put an extinguisher on the sun for a moment, every star would reappear, and be seen twinkling and glittering for you again; but, release the sun once more, and again the stars disappear just as before. Now, I take it that something analogous takes place in the spiritual order. Mortal sin is so inconceivably great an evil that, by comparison, venial sin seems scarcely to be evil at all. Just as a great light renders it difficult to measure the brightness of a lesser light, or even to perceive it at all, so our familiarity with a greater evil will cause us to think little of a lesser evil, or perhaps not to regard it as an evil at all.

Through the mercy of God, many of us have, perhaps, never once, during the whole course of our lives, fallen into mortal sin. But even then, there can be no doubt but that we are familiar with it; that is to say, we are perfectly well aware that it is being committed by thousands of persons every day. We can never take up a paper without meeting cases of theft, of murder, of suicide, of drunkenness, and of fighting and quarrelling and the rest. We are not only horrified, but unfortunately the result often is that we are disposed to reserve all our indignation, loathing, hatred, and execration for mortal sin; while we grow somewhat tolerant and even indulgent of venial sin, and very likely say that we would feel quite satisfied “if the people did nothing worse.” And, of course, in a way, we are right. For mortal sin is, in very truth, immeasurably worse than venial. It is inexpressively more odious and loathsome in itself, and inexpressively more disastrous and fatal in its consequences. So that we are bound to admit that by comparison venial sin looks, and indeed is, very insignificant indeed. When placed side by side with that hellish monster, the vileness and ingratitude of venial sin seem to disappear, as the light of the stars before the greater light of the noonday sun.

This is the utmost that can be alleged on behalf of venial sin. Once we have declared that it is not as hateful and abominable as mortal sin, we have said absolutely all that even the strongest advocate could possibly urge in its favor. But in itself — and it is in itself that we must consider it — it is by far the most hideous and hateful thing imaginable, and to



be opposed, fought against, resisted, wrestled with, and execrated with the utmost industry and determination. If, for the moment, we put mortal sin altogether out of our calculation, we may affirm, without hesitation and without the slightest exaggeration, that there is literally no evil whatsoever so great as venial sin. Evils of all kinds exist in the world, or what worldly men call evils, such as poverty, disgrace, disease, wounds, misfortunes, losses, agonies, death, and so forth. Yet none of these evils, however distressing and galling, contain a fraction of the evil that lies concentrated in one venial sin.

Sadly, we deceive ourselves when we try to palliate our venial faults and slur them over, because we allow ourselves to be led by our imagination rather than by our reason. Setting aside, then, our imagination, let us apply our reason. Faith tells us that the Catholic Church is the Oracle of God, the mouthpiece of Jesus Christ. We know, with absolute certainty, that when she opens her mouth she speaks the infallible truth; and that she is incapable of overstating or of in any way exaggerating Christ's doctrine. Now, keeping this well in mind, we proceed to ask what exactly she teaches regarding the present point. She teaches that:

- Every venial sin is an offense against God,
- No circumstance or motive whatsoever can ever justify committing it,
- A man is bound to embrace any other alternative, however painful and however difficult and distressing, rather than incur the guilt of venial sin,
- And it is, in all cases, an insult, offered by a contemptible nothing, to the Infinite Majesty of God.

As Cardinal Newman expresses it in his own incomparable way, “The Church holds that it were better for sun and moon to drop from Heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions who are on it to die of starvation, in the most extreme agony (as far as temporal affliction goes), than that one soul, I will not say should be lost, but should commit ONE SINGLE VENIAL SIN.” <sup>1</sup>

Hence, if we might escape the most agonizing disease, ending in an excruciating death, by yielding to a small venial sin, we should unhesitatingly choose agony and death. If by giving way to such a fault we could ward off pestilence, famine, fire, sword, earthquakes, and inundations, which otherwise would destroy every living soul from one end of the world to the other, it would be absolutely sinful and impious for us to commit it, and we should be justly punished were we to yield to the temptation.

Why? Because no evil, no accumulation of evils, and no continuation of evils (provided sin is not included amongst them) can equal the evil that is contained in even the least moral fault. Nay, so immeasurable is the evil of venial sin, that it would be wrong to consent to it, even though by its means we could convert all heretics and infidels, bring all sinners to repentance, empty Purgatory, and restore the lost in hell to grace and salvation. Yea, even if we were able to secure to all men, present, past, and future, the joys and delights of the Beatific Vision, we are bound to declare bluntly, emphatically, and without hesitation, that such an act of venial sin must not be permitted.

Why? Because it is so horrible an evil that the worst privations, suffered by all living creatures, are as nothing compared to it. But there is no use multiplying comparisons, since, whatever the physical or material evils may be, they can never approach the degree of evil contained in a single venial sin.

This is not an “opinion.” It is a certain fact. It is not a view. It is not the teaching of some particular school. No! It is a dogma of our holy Faith. It is terrible! Undoubtedly. But it is true. It is incomprehensible, and my reason sits uneasily under the doctrine. Certainly, it is incomprehensible and hard to bear. But, again, we repeat it is true. That, after all, is the important point.

There are many truths hard to believe in our holy religion. There are many mysteries and, of them all, sin is, perhaps, one of the most difficult. But we are bound to accept these revealed truths, all the same. Our reason is limited. Being finite, it is incompetent to deal with every supernatural revelation. God Himself is a mystery to us, and all His thoughts deeper than any human plummet can sound. “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments! How unsearchable are His ways!” (Rom. xi 33) exclaims Saint Paul. Though this doctrine is of Faith, yet, if once we admit the existence of an infinitely perfect God, it may be shown to be according to sound reason as well as to Faith. Thus sin, even venial sin, is an offense offered to God. All other evils, of whatever kind, are offenses offered to creatures. However, since God is infinitely exalted above creatures, it follows that the least insult or injury offered to God is a greater evil than the greatest offered to His creatures. Let us clothe our argument in the folds of a parable.

A mighty and perfect king, while strolling through his domains one day, chanced to dip the point of his finger into the waters of a stagnant pond. On withdrawing it, he notices a tiny drop adhering to it. Now, in that drop, let us suppose, there are millions and millions of living creatures—infusoria, protozoa, and the like. It is true you cannot see them with the naked eye, but they are there. In fact, the little drop is more thickly populated by these minute creatures than the world is populated by human beings.

Now, which act would be considered the greater evil, an act that would destroy the life of this wise and noble king, or an act that would destroy the lives of every inhabitant of that raindrop world? There can be no doubt as to what the answer would be. But go a step further and ask, which would be the greater evil, an act by which the king should lose, not his life, but merely his sight, or his hearing, or one of his limbs or organs, or, on the other hand, an act by which the entire microscopic world of infusoria should be utterly annihilated? Again, there would be no hesitation in our reply. Why is this? Because a wise and noble king, or indeed, any human being, stands so far above and so immensely superior to an animalcule, that it would be better that millions should perish altogether than that a single man should ever experience any pain, hurt, or even any slight inconvenience.

The application of this fable is clear enough. All creatures, both angelic and human — in short, the whole universe of being — are not only less, but infinitely less, when compared to God, than a drop full of animalcules is, when compared to a man. Between the mightiest monarch and the smallest of invisible animalcules the distance is, after all, not infinite; but between God and even the highest of the Cherubim or Seraphim the distance is absolutely infinite and inconceivable.

As a consequence, the slightest injury done to God must be immeasurably worse in itself than any conceivable injury done to man or angel. So that, in itself, it would be far better and more desirable that all men should be in pain than that God alone should be in any way offended: that all creatures should perish than that God should be in any way slighted or contradicted.

This, then, is the doctrine of the Church of God. We have to accept it, not as a speculative truth, not as a theory, but as a profound fact, which touches us most nearly and most personally. What, then, are we to think of a person who professes to believe venial sin to be so gigantic an evil, and so outrageous an insult, and yet who takes little or no pains to avoid it? What estimate shall we make of a man's sincerity when, on the one hand, we hear him affirm that death and disgrace are infinitely to be preferred to the slightest sin, while, on the other hand, we see him yielding to such sins on the slightest provocation, while he will make any sacrifices to ward off the approach of death, or even of poverty or disease? Surely, our faith ought to control our conduct, and direct and shape our lives. No doubt, it would do so if it were a vivid faith—if, in a word, we were more fully conscious of its teaching and more keenly anxious to obey its voice.

Go back over your past lives. Summon your past experience to your aid and ask yourself, “When I chattered away so glibly with So and So, defamed such a one, criticized or

found fault with such another, prevaricated to exalt myself or to depreciate a rival, 'economized' the truth to serve ignoble ends; or was guilty of other venial offenses, was I at all conscious of what I was doing?"

"Did I advert to the fact that I was, in very truth, the real and the sole cause of a greater calamity and of a worse evil than the earthquake that swallows up whole cities; than the plague, or the Black Death, that slays its many millions; or the cruel waters of the Deluge, which drowned an entire world?"

No, perhaps not, but as a matter of simple fact I was guilty of a far worse evil. Where, oh, where is our faith? Can we accept such a doctrine and go on sinning? Can we acknowledge venial sin to be all we have said, and indeed, more than we have said, and yet continue to give way to it on the slightest pretext?

To witness the ease with which even good and holy men succumb, one might indeed suppose that their Faith had grown very defective, or that they had ceased altogether to believe. Perhaps the truer explanation is not that they do not believe, but that they fail to reflect, to realize, and heartily to acknowledge to themselves what the Church actually teaches.

Alas! It is too true. We find difficulty in judging aright, and can hardly be persuaded to see things as God sees them, because we are still so imperfect, and in such spiritual darkness. "The sensual man perceiveth not the things that are of the Spirit of God; for it is foolishness to him" (1 Cor. ii 14). Well may holy David ask, "Delicta quis intelligit?"

But the nearer we approach to God, and the more brightly the light of grace burns in our hearts, the more shall we come to understand the filth and fetidness of venial sin, and the more carefully and the more successfully shall we wage a relentless war against our daily faults and imperfections.

Let us, then, apply ourselves to the important task earnestly and without delay, for the years are hurrying by, and the day of life is already far spent, and the night is fast approaching, when no man can work.

## CHAPTER II

I SUPPOSE all, without so much as one exception, who have given the matter their serious consideration, will admit that none of us sufficiently estimates, in practice, the

seriousness and the intrinsic malignity of deliberate venial sin. This utter want of anything approaching a due appreciation of its malice and deformity arises from various causes.

We have already considered, in our first chapter, what we take to be the chief cause; but others also deserve mentioning.

The second cause is our unfortunate familiarity with venial faults. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt. This is especially true in the case before us. The majority of people get so accustomed to follow nature rather than grace, and to give way to whatever inclination comes uppermost, so long as the matter is not grievous, that at last they scarcely advert to the innumerable little offenses and, lesser violations of God's law of which they are guilty. Very few take the trouble even to think about them, or to make them a subject of serious examination. The very fact that they are perpetually being betrayed into small infidelities, renders them almost insensible of them. This, unfortunately, seems to be a law of our nature.

A third reason is because, although we sin and sin again and again venially, no harm seems to come of it. The fault and its punishment do not follow one another at once. Nothing happens to compel us to feel the malice of it as soon as it is committed. In former times, God was wont — from time to time — to visit the offender with immediate and condign punishment. Because Moses doubted for a moment, when God told him to strike the rock and that water would gush out, he is thought to have been guilty of a mere venial offense, yet he was, there and then, most severely punished. For he was forbidden to enter the Promised Land, towards which he had been slowly and anxiously approaching for forty years, and had then almost reached, and which was already in sight.

We have another case, in the person of Zachary, the father of Saint John the Baptist. As a punishment of one little venial sin, he was struck both deaf and dumb.

Even the sin of Ananias and Saphira, lied about some land they had bought, is not thought, by many commentators, to have been more than venial. Yet, because of that lie, first Ananias was struck down dead, and then, almost immediately afterwards, his wife Saphira. How few would tell lies as readily as they do now, if such summary punishment were general in these days!

Take another case. Mary, the sister of Moses, began to murmur against him, and spoke ill of him, and behold, God caused her to be immediately punished by leprosy, so that the Scripture tells us, “Behold, Mary appeared white as snow with leprosy” (Num. xii 10).

How different things would be in these days, if every uncharitable thought and every unkind word were to engender, as soon as uttered, some very painful and loathsome disease that would rack our nerves with pain! Such is not God's method. His punishment for venial sin is far worse than any leprosy, but He reserves it for another world. We shall understand something of the evil of venial sin when we are burning amid the purging flames of Purgatory. One of the reasons of our present carelessness in avoiding slight offenses is because, during this life, we may commit them with apparent impunity.

A fourth cause is the utterly false view taken of venial sin by the world around us. Man is very much affected, as a rule, by the views, opinions, and judgments of those among whom he lives. Whether he reads the papers, or magazines, or books, or whether he converses with friends and companions, or merely listens to them talk and exchanging views with one another, he will realize how very few attach the smallest importance to slight sins. Now, he does not claim to be wiser or more enlightened than others, and has a very convenient way of accepting their estimate of most things. He finds that sin is a very small evil in their eyes, or perhaps none at all. They refer to it without horror, call it by soft names, and laugh and joke about it, as though it were unworthy of serious thought. In fact, the world, as Cardinal Newman observes, thinks sin “the same sort of imperfection as an impropriety, or a want of taste, or infirmity,” and nothing more.

As we are living in the world, and mixing with all sorts and conditions of men, we shall find ourselves, almost inadvertently, adopting their judgments, unless, arousing ourselves to a sense of our danger, we take prompt steps to neutralize it. But, “*Quis est hic, et laudabimus eum? Fecit enim mirabilia in vita sua.*”

In order to be really secure, we must be constantly correcting inwardly the false teaching of the world, and calling to mind the true doctrine of the infallible witness to God's eternal Truth.

Now, setting aside for the moment all question of mortal sin, we have already considered that venial sin is the very greatest of all possible evils, and that literally no greater calamity could possibly befall us than to be stricken with the stain of even one deliberate venial sin.

Let us now call to mind the fact that it is according to God's plan, and a law of His infinite justice, that no one shall “work iniquity” without reaping the consequences. If I yield deliberately to as much as one single venial fault, I thereby not only commit evil, but, at the same time, I do myself a very serious injury. In consequence of this offense, I shall suffer in this life and I shall suffer in the next. For the present, we will confine our remarks to some of the more notable consequences that follow venial sin in this world.



The first of these is that it darkens the intellect and clouds the judgment concerning the things of God. Just as there is night and day in the physical order, so there is night and day in the spiritual order. Now what the sun is in the material world, God is in the spiritual world. He is the “Sun of Justice,” “the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world” (John I, 9). God does not scatter His gifts equally upon all. His light shines with far greater brilliance in the heart of the saint than in the heart of the sinner. The freer the soul is from sin, and the purer it is from every defect, the more fully the light of God enters into it, and the more far-reaching and perfect its vision becomes. It is as it is with material light. Thus, though the sun may shine with exactly the same power on two different windows, yet the amount of light entering them may be absolutely different. If the windowpanes are perfectly clean and spotless, the sun will enter freely and flood the whole room with its light and those within it will be able to see every object with the utmost clearness. However, if the window is covered with dust and dirt and begrimed with the accumulated deposits of years, the rays of light will indeed beat upon it as before, but with very little effect. Little, if any, light will enter, and the hideousness and the feter, even of the most filthy objects, will be scarcely distinguishable. Such is a fair picture of a soul stained with a multitude of venial faults and failings. These, by reason of their being “deeds of darkness,” obscure the light of the Holy Spirit, so (even with the best will in the world) a soul so circumstanced utterly fails to realize the full enormity even of the gravest sin and will fall much more easily and much more deeply than those who keep their consciences pure and free from even the smallest defects.

“Ordinary Christians [says Father Bowden] are aware, probably, of habitual falls into venial sins of the coarser kind, but of the subtler workings of their self-love and of, spiritual sins they know little or nothing. The saints, on the other hand, search their souls by the light of God's perfections. One ray of His eternal purity entering their hearts discloses, as horrible deformities, their least defects, while the closeness of their relations to Him shows these defects to be a personal outrage on the divine Majesty. Before the eyes of a saint, thus enlightened, the all-holy God is not only their Creator and Lawgiver, but the one Being on Whose influx and support they depend for every vital action; according to the words of the Apostle: „In Him we live and move and are.“ From this arises their sense of the hideous malice of sin.” <sup>1</sup>

There can be no doubt that a soul who is careful to abstain as far as possible from every imperfection, however small, that can offend God, is a soul that has drawn very near to Him, who is the Sun of Justice. This divine Sun sheds such a penetrating light within his heart that he becomes extremely sensitive to the least defect, and can, in a measure,

recognize more clearly than others, not only the presence, but also the loathsomeness, of faults that otherwise would be scarcely noticed or perhaps not be reckoned as offenses at all!

“We do not know what sin is [writes Cardinal Newman] because we do not know what God is; we have no standard with which to compare it till we know what God is. Only God's glories, His perfections, His holiness, His majesty, His beauty, can teach us, by the contrast, how to think of sin; and (since we do not see God here), till we see Him we cannot form a just judgment of what sin is; till we enter heaven we must take what God tells us of sin mainly on faith. Nay, even then we shall be able to condemn sin only so far as we are able to see and praise and glorify God; he alone can duly judge of sin who can comprehend God; he only judged of sin according to the fullness of its evil, who, knowing the Father from eternity with a perfect knowledge, showed what He thought of sin by dying for it; He only, who was willing, though He was God, to suffer inconceivable pains of soul and body in order to make satisfaction for it. Take His word, or rather His deed, for the truth of this awful doctrine — that a single mortal sin is enough to cut you off from God forever.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me add, that a single venial sin is enough to cut you off from the full possession of God, in the Beatific Vision, so long at least as it is not fully repented of and atoned for.

If there is anyone in this world who can form some appreciable estimate of the heinousness of venial sin, it is only the pure of heart, for they alone are given the grace, according to the text: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” Just as one of the rewards of perfect innocence and freedom, even from venial sin, is a wonderful sense of the holiness of God and of His unapproachable sanctity, so one of the punishments of venial sins and imperfections is a diminution of that sense and a spiritual blindness, which causes us to minimize its evil.

— But deliberate venial sins bring upon us a second punishment. They render the will less vigorous in resisting temptation, so that one who habitually yields to even small faults will yield far more easily to serious sins than one who is more faithful. This is easy to understand, for the will, like any other faculty, is susceptible of education. Its powers are drawn out, strengthened, and developed by exercise. It may be trained either to resist its attractions or to follow them blindly. In itself, the will is most plastic and malleable, so that it may be molded in this way or in that, according to our good pleasure. And, if we accustom ourselves to resist and to overcome our inordinate inclinations, the effort grows

<sup>1</sup> Discourses to Mixed Cong., p. 34.

easier and easier as time goes on. Man is essentially a creature of habit; and habit is the result of constant repetition. In fact, without repetition we cannot form a habit. This is true in every department of life. Take the first stone-carrier or bricklayer you meet on the road, and set him down in front of a grand piano. Place his hands on the keyboard, and ask him, I will not say to play, but merely to run his fingers rapidly and smoothly up and down the scales. Impossible! As well, ask him to talk Hebrew. But why? Surely, it cannot be so extremely difficult in itself, for even the little schoolgirl will acquit herself of the task with the greatest ease. No, it is not so very hard. With a little practice it is easy enough, but remember this, without practice it is not only difficult but also impossible.

Practice makes the joints supple and ready to obey the slightest behest of the will, so that the fingers glide to and fro, and from bass to treble and from treble to bass, over the keys, as though to nature born. Now it is very much the same thing with regard to the will. The will, almost spontaneously and of itself, will learn to resist evil and do good, just as the fingers will learn how to perform with skill upon the piano. But it is essential that I take my will in hand, and carefully cultivate it. I must teach it and instruct it. I must exercise it, every day and many times a day, in the most important art of resisting and conquering my evil inclinations in small things. To acquire a perfect command of any musical instrument whatsoever, one has to take trouble, and to spend time, and to go through the exercises and to practice assiduously. And, what is more, thousands are quite ready to submit to this drudgery and to brace themselves up to the task, merely to become perfect masters of the piano, or the organ, or the violin. Surely, we should be ready and anxious to do as much, and far more, in order to grow perfect in the service of God and in the practice of virtue.

If I am constantly checking myself, and denying myself, and curbing my passions, and restraining my desires, and suppressing my evil inclinations, and bridling my tongue, and keeping a guard over my eyes, etc., etc., I am not only exercising virtue (which is an exceedingly important thing), but I am doing much more. I am actually engaged in forming a habit which will be of immense and, indeed, of incalculable service to me in my spiritual warfare. I am doing a truly admirable thing. I am laying the foundations of true sanctity; that is to say, I am forming a habit which will be ever strengthening my will, and rendering it more robust and better able to resist temptation. I am training it to conquer, and fitting it for more certain and greater victories. Yes, literally, I am training as an athlete trains for a race, or as a musician practices for a display on the piano.

Surely, it must be quite evident that one who zealously and perseveringly strives to overcome venial sin is — from the very nature of the case — always exercising his will in the right direction, and establishing it more and more firmly in virtue. What is the result? The result is that when some really serious and dangerous temptation assails him,

he will make short work of it, and gain a most glorious victory. His will, being inured to resistance and thoroughly well trained in the art of self-denial, will run no real risk, but will achieve an easy, a speedy, and a most decisive triumph. He will bear down his adversary, as one quite familiar to the task: much as a boxer, in full training, will floor an inexperienced neophyte who should dare to attack him.

Compare such a true soldier of Jesus Christ with the easygoing, careless, self-indulgent, and listless Christian, who deems it quite enough to restrain himself from mortal sin. Such a cowardly and unworthy follower of Christ yields himself up to his desires, so long as they demand nothing grievously wrong. He is afraid of hell and resolves to escape the quenchless flames, for if he has no exalted love of God, he has a most exaggerated love of himself. But he has no very strong hatred and abhorrence of lesser offenses. He makes no attempt to repress little sallies of temper, little fits of jealousy, harsh or uncharitable words, or proud and ambitious thoughts. He will not hesitate to tell what he calls a “white lie” in order to excuse himself, and will retire to bed, if very tired, without saying his night prayers, and will (without getting actually drunk) indulge far too freely in champagne or whisky. Now observe. He too is training his will. Yes, alas! He is training it to yield; and practicing it all the daylong in the art not of self-restraint but of self-indulgence. In a word, he too (whether he adverts to it or not) is diligently forming and fostering a habit — that horrible habit of sin.

What is the consequence? His will becomes enfeebled and languid and, by long custom, yields most readily to every evil suggestion. His will can hardly ever be induced to do anything as unusual and formidable as to resist serious temptation. In fact, being trained so assiduously and for so long to indulge its inclination in lesser things, the will feels quite unmanned and helpless in the presence of the much more violent and powerful temptation, and knows not how to oppose it. A man who will not resist trifling acts of dishonesty, and who cannot keep his fingers off pence or shillings when they lie in his way, is not likely to keep them off pounds and banknotes when the opportunity arises.

There are two warnings given us in this connection. The one is an axiom of human wisdom and observation, viz., *Nemo repente summus*. No one becomes wicked all at once. If this is true, we may be sure that a person who habitually shuns small faults will not suddenly drop into grievous ones. It is only he who begins to give way in little things, and who allows himself certain unlawful liberties, who, at length, sinks into deadly sins, wrecks his whole life, and “purchases for himself damnation.” The second warning to which I have referred is of yet greater importance, as it comes to us with the infallible authority of the Holy Ghost. He distinctly declares, by the lips of Ecclesiasticus (xix 1) that “He who contemneth small things, shall fall by little and little.”

Small sins pave the way for more serious sins. To use a common expression, they introduce the thin end of the wedge, which may then be more easily driven right in, to our serious discomfiture. They may be compared to the fissures and splits in an otherwise worthy vessel. They let the tide in, which may at last sink the whole ship, with all its valuable cargo, and send it to the bottom.

Some very foolish persons calmly make up their minds to avoid mortal sin, while reserving to themselves full liberty to commit as many venial sins as they please.

In this, they utterly deceive themselves. It is impossible to carry out such a resolve. To hit the bull's-eye on a target you must point your arrow, not at it, but above it. In like manner, to succeed in avoiding all mortal sin, it will not suffice to aim at avoiding mortal sin only. We must aim higher. We must resolve to avoid, as far as we can, all deliberate venial sin also. Otherwise, we shall share the fate of the Italian coach driver on the Alps, who argued that it mattered nothing how near to the edge of the precipice the wheels might go, provided they did not go beyond the edge. Till at last, one day, attempting to illustrate this theory, he somewhat miscalculated the distance, the result of which was that he and his coach and all in it suddenly disappeared into the abyss. A similar fate awaits all those who hover around as near to the very brink of mortal sin as they think they can get. Like the too venturesome moth, pirouetting around the flaring flame, is burnt to death when it least expects it. So much for the FIRST punishment that follows upon deliberate venial sin.

Now let us consider the SECOND. The habit of committing venial sin not only weakens our will and darkens our understanding, but it also increases the violence and the strength of our spiritual enemies, by which I mean our passions, sinful desires, and evil inclinations. Our unmortified propensities may be compared to those tiny little sparks of fire that are found in a brazier full of burning charcoal. Though they are indeed but sparks, they possess much latent power. If you merely fan them, as I have often seen Italian servants do, they begin to glow more and more brightly. If you continue to blow upon them ever so softly, they, all of a sudden, cease to be sparks and break into flame. Finally, they produce a regular conflagration of which there is no managing or controlling. In like manner, small passions easily grow by little indulgences, until they become almost irresistible. A story is told of a certain Indian chief who, having shot a fine lioness, took compassion on her tiny little cub, and brought it home and made a pet of it. So long as it remained a mere cub he experienced no difficulty in dealing with it. But as he kept on feeding it day by day it became stronger and stronger, until at last, in a fit of anger, it one day rushed at its benefactor and tore him to pieces. So is it with our passions. While they are still incipient and undeveloped, we may keep them within bounds, but so soon as we begin to feed them — that is to say, so soon as we give them



what they crave for, and indulge their appetite — they develop and grow stronger and stronger, till at last they will master us and bring about our downfall. Suppose a case.

A man overindulges in drink. He does not get actually drunk, but takes frequently more than he ought. He is feeding the lioness's whelp. In this way, he strengthens it. At last, a day comes when the inclination proves too strong for him, and he sins grievously. The whelp has torn him to pieces (spiritually). Or a man may feel the promptings of some impure desire. He begins by allowing himself some slight liberties. He becomes a little venturesome and imprudent. In a word, he feeds this whelp of Satan, this evil passion, till, growing stronger and stronger by each indulgence, it, so to speak, falls upon him at last, and tears him to pieces; in other words, destroys the life of grace in his soul.

Thus, it is evident that habitual venial sin produces two most disastrous effects at one and the same time. On the one hand, it strengthens our temptations. On the other hand, it weakens our will and makes us far less able to resist them. In other words, it gives our enemies greater power to harm us, while it reduces our power of resistance. These consequences are bad enough, but this is not all.

In the third place, venial sin also deprives us of that special and altogether exceptional friendship which God is ever ready to show to those who are aiming at perfection. This constitutes the **THIRD** punishment of such offenses. All masters of the spiritual life are agreed that, by our small infidelities and self-indulgence, we forfeit all right to God's choicest and highest favors and blessings. It is true that He gives enough to all. All may reckon upon receiving His ordinary graces. But, in addition to that, there are a vast number of rare and indeed priceless graces that He reserves for His more dutiful and obedient children. On these He is wont to confer innumerable spiritual gifts and helps, which He withholds from those who are careless and lukewarm in His service have rendered them wholly undeserving. God defends and protects in some measure every soul that calls upon Him, but He has an altogether special love for such as are aiming at a yet closer union with Him, and these He watches over and guards, as the “very apple of His eye” (*ut pupillam oculi*).

What the exact measure of this loss may be, in any particular case, none of us shall know until we enter into the next world, and learn exactly how far short we are of having reached the exalted position to which we might have attained had we shown a little more zeal.

Venial sin deprives us of God's special favors. We do not say that it extinguishes divine grace. No! Thank God! That it can never do. Whether our soul is stained by one, by a thousand, or by a hundred thousand venial offenses, they can never deprive it altogether



of the friendship of almighty God. Venial sins do not coalesce like other things. It is true that twelve pence will make a shilling, and that 160 stone weight will make one ton; but no number of venial sins, however they may be multiplied, can ever make or equal one mortal sin, nor convert God from a friend into an enemy, as mortal sin does.

What other effect, then, have venial sins upon the soul? They disfigure its beauty, they bespatter it with moral filth, they stain it, they wound it, they render it so unsightly and hideous that it can never be admitted into heaven so long as they remain adhering to it. But it is still alive with the life of divine grace, though its vitality is much enfeebled. God's attitude towards such a soul may be compared to a loving mother's attitude towards her own sick child. The child may be ill, and its poor little body weakened by disease, and covered with pustules and pimples and festering ulcers and running scars, but she loves it still and cherishes it, as only a mother can. She will no longer press it to her bosom, nor smother it with kisses, because its flesh is one mass of filthy scabs, but she will not cast it off from her, nor utterly despise it. No, her attitude is still one of gentleness, compassion, and even of love. When the poor little body is not only unsightly, but also absolutely cold and dead, she tearfully submits to be separated from it. She allows strange hands to be laid upon her child and the infant corpse to be taken away from her, and to be flung into the grave, out of her sight forever.

So in the case of Almighty God. No venial sin, however horrid and loathsome it may be in His sight, can cause Him to withdraw His love. It is only when mortal sin has actually destroyed the life of grace, that He allows strangers — i.e., the demons — to claim their victims, and to take final possession of the guilty soul. On the other hand, no one can form any conception of the deformity of venial sin, or understand how it lays waste the beauty of the soul. No one can realize the injury a soul does itself by such carelessness and remissness in corresponding with the ever-available grace of God, which would have protected it from all evil. God has sometimes, as we read in the lives of His saints, brought the image of a single venial sin before them as it appears in the light of His countenance, and they tell us that the sight did all but kill them, nay, would have killed them, had it not been instantly withdrawn. <sup>1</sup>

If we cannot actually see the full deformity and malice of venial sin as such favored souls have seen it, let us at least stir up our faith and believe it fully, and so merit a more special blessing from our divine Lord, on the strength of our being among those who, though they “have not seen, yet have believed” (John xx, 29). We may foolishly try to persuade ourselves that it is a trifling thing to avoid venial sins. Yet it is such “trifles that make perfection,” and, as Michael Angelo said, “perfection is no trifle”!

**1. Vide Newman, DISC. to Mixed Cong., pp. 338 et seq.**

**Nihil Obstat**

G. H. Joyce, S.J.,  
Censor Deputatus

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